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Ken Eastman



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Factory Formed

The objects produced as a result of the collaboration between Ken Eastman and Royal Crown Derby impress Nicholas Oddy.

Since the mid nineteenth century the history of British ceramics has been sprinkled with attempts to bring fine art and studio practice together with varying degrees of success. If nothing else, it leaves a legacy of rich pickings for collectors. Such initiatives involving studio ceramics were severely restricted by the self-inflicted isolation from, and overt opposition to, 'industry' by the disciples of Bernard Leach and the sentiments of *A Potter's Book*. While that is now largely a thing of the past, there is still a conceptual leap between the two types of practice that presents a challenge, but one taken up by what seems at first a bizarre pairing: Ken Eastman, maker of large, stoneware, abstract, slab-built vessels, each an exercise in single-handed individuality, and Royal Crown Derby, a bone china factory making highly decorated figurines and tablewares in a tradition some two centuries old.

FAST FORWARD Three years ago Louise Adams (a contemporary of Eastman's at the Royal College of Art in the 1980s), art director at Derby, invited him to visit the factory. The 1980s were the period Peter Dormer termed the 'new ceramics', initiating debates such as those around the ICA exhibition *Fast Forward*, which attempted to reposition studio ceramics in a history that included the decorative and the factory-made. In this intellectual context the idea of Eastman and Derby seems unproblematic; indeed, if anything, emblematic of the sort of historical links and juxtapositions that such post-modern thought encouraged. However, Eastman's work is distinctly ahistoric in its aesthetic and overtly studio in its making; it is not as if one can discern any referencing to the likes of Derby in its conception or processing. Rather, Eastman seems to have been invited just because his work was so far from Derby's output in every way that his very presence would act as a challenge that might spark something... but what?



This question remained unanswered for some months after the collaboration began, neither party knowing exactly why Eastman was there. For his part Eastman found, and still finds, the culture of the factory, with its carefully regulated working practices and division of labour, fascinating. Derby viewed Eastman as a shape-maker and had to accommodate the fact that studio practice tends not to operate in this manner. They were (to use his own words) 'slightly puzzled' by his taking on everything from rolling the clay to finishing the decoration. However, Eastman thinks that their interest in shape is not surprising. In a factory that specialises in naturalistic modelling and the tried-and-tested, Eastman's exploration of form is so far from the factory's conventional ways of working that it had the potential to generate new ways of thinking about formal design at Derby.

DECORATION If shape was the pay-off for Derby, then decoration seems to be the one for Eastman. The factory's pattern books and their use of modern transfer technologies to effect what were once

complex hand-paints in the Imari style fascinated him. Eastman experimented with applying transfer decoration to bone china shapes, which he continued to slab-build. To anyone familiar only with Eastman's current studio practice the idea of such a combination might seem unprecedented, but as a student at Edinburgh College of Art in the early eighties he produced water-eroded raku platters and jugs decorated with commercial earthenware glazes that basked under such names as Rooster Red, Cool Custard, Banshee Blue and Tempting Turquoise, an early exercise in similar incongruity.

BONE CHINA As Eastman discovered, the bone china body is notoriously plastic and given to flopping both before and during firing, while its high shrinkage is prone to cracking in studio-type contexts. Usually, Eastman's shapes are strictly controlled and made in rigid bodies, such as T material, which has small shrinkage and





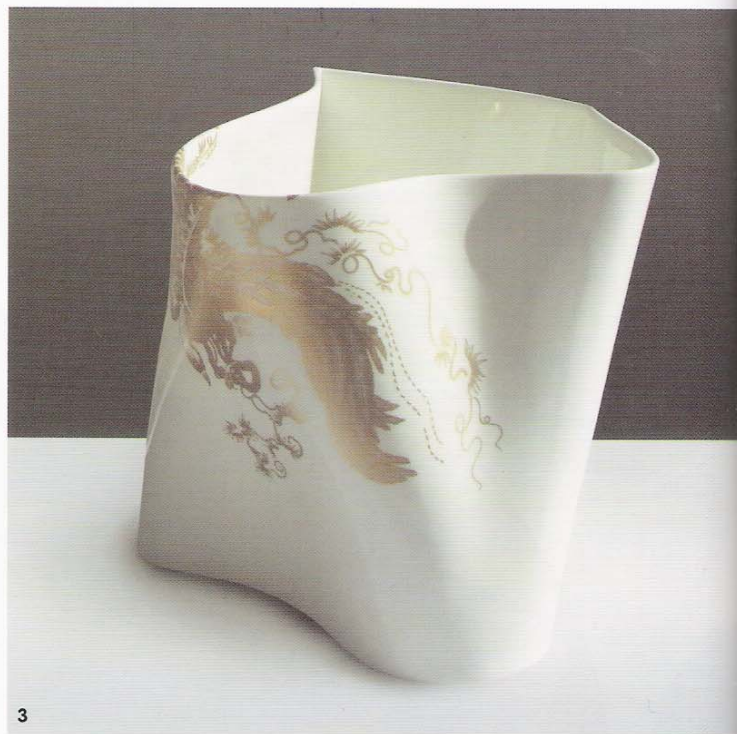
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minimal movement. Often working to a scale only slightly smaller than his usual, Eastman fell foul of all the problems bone china could throw at him – compromises had to be made. The material's floppiness could be harnessed; the curves on the bone china pieces, though smooth and perfect in their gleaming white, have a sense of freedom that only its uncontrollability allows. Size has generally been reduced and, while practice has eliminated much of the cracking, some of the most intriguing pieces are those that utilise the cracks in conjunction with the transfers.

While Eastman began by using 'found' transfers, designed for standard Derby tablewares, he soon began to experiment. Special versions were made up for him, usually over-sized elements from Imari patterns in which a leaf or petal is isolated and magnified to be more in keeping with the scale and formal qualities of Eastman's pieces. Although, at first, this seems more fitting than the use of the as-found transfers, in fact the pieces decorated in this way seem less successful in that they lose the sense of balance achieved between the bold, abstract forms and the intricacies of the unmolested Derby transfers. The overt 'Derby-ness' of the standard transfers makes a statement about the origin of the pieces that is largely concealed in the bespoke transfer decoration.

Although the Eastman-Derby pieces were shown at the Barrett Marsden Gallery, London in 2007 alongside his usual stoneware pieces, their first real test was at the Scottish Gallery in Edinburgh, where they took pole position. Encouragingly, every piece was sold. The success confirmed the faith of Louise Adams and Hugh Gibson (Derby's Managing Director) in the potential of Eastman-Derby work, putting the factory into a rarefied but prestigious cultural context from which it had been largely unaware and from which it had been excluded.

PRODUCTION In the last year Eastman has been working with the factory to develop a series of shapes suitable for slip-casting. While



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the one-offs might be termed 'Eastman-Derby', perhaps the slip-cast range should be 'Derby-Eastman'. Slip-casting is far removed from Eastman's repertoire, while the structural quality of his work is heavily reliant on the tension of the clay in slab form and obvious overlaid joints, both absent from slip-casting. As a student Eastman's experience of slip-casting was no more than a tokenistic exercise. Studio-made plaster moulds tend to lightness and basic practicality,



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2 Blue Aves dish, bone china, 2009, W42cm 3 Gold Aves vessel, bone china, 2009, H21cm 4 Derby Variations, bone china, 2007, H24cm 5 Border Lines, bone china, 2007, H14cm

Ken Eastman's latest work will be on show at The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh, 3-27 June 2009. Web www.scottish-gallery.co.uk Ken Eastman Web www.keneastman.co.uk Nicholas Oddy Email n.oddy@gsa.ac.uk



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Derby plaster moulds to permanence – an art form in their own right. If the scale of Eastman's work is a challenge in slip-cast bone china, an engaging bit of determinism has prevented the manufacture of one piece that is not to do with the casting or firing, but the moulds themselves. Derby likes its moulds to be square and, as such, the mould for the largest form, a platter, was too heavy to handle when filled and has been shelved. The company will have to invest in lifting gear if the complete range is to be produced.

What is in production are a series of vessels, the tallest in the manner of an overlaid cylinder. As an overlay is impossible in a casting, a step substitutes and gives the piece a clearly 'manufactured' feel. To this writer, who enjoys such compromises and sees them as a serious challenge, in the making process, it is fascinating to see the way Eastman has reconsidered his work, but there will be others who see such details as false. Another compromise involves a sharp corner where, in an Eastman-Derby piece, it would be slip-jointed slabs, but in the Derby-Eastman it is merely a corner.

The quality of the making is magnificent. The walls are thin and flawless with glass-like translucency that makes the undulating forms reminiscent of Alvar Aalto. A shelf full of identical Eastmans is a salutary experience – the factory even lids them during the firing process to prevent them moving about, yet one could be

easily convinced that they have been allowed to move to their own accord. Better still, a shelf of Eastmans in the midst of Derby's other products is the twenty-first century equivalent to seeing the pattern-book photographs of Christopher Dresser's more outrageous silver teapots amidst James Dixon's more conservative output in the nineteenth century.

The range goes down to tiny (for Eastman) vessels of about three inches high. These are clearly Eastman shapes but lack the 'overlays' and joints of the larger forms. Their dinky scale and fine qualities gives these a serious commercial prospect in Derby's traditional market of *bijouterie* collectors. Should they sell, one can see a possibility for Derby to develop whole ranges of asymmetric wares deriving from the collaboration, thus fulfilling their original perception of Eastman as shape-maker. Meanwhile, Eastman is beginning to incorporate elements of floral decoration into his trademark studio practice. That this unlikely combination has developed such an effective working relationship, whatever its longer-term prospects, is an impressive indication of just how far British studio practice has travelled on the road to more liberal thinking. 